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THE CONCEPT OF THE NEUTRAL IN RECENT  
EPISTEMOLOGY

ABOUT the time in which the concept of neutrality was going out of favor in politics it came to the front in epistemology. Some ambiguity seems to attach, however, to the concept of neutrality in the latter as in the former realm. In the interest of clarity, not in that of any particular school of thought, I wish to set forth two meanings which certainly *may* attach to the concept, with the hope that some of those who profess themselves believers in neutral entities may be led to greater explicitness.

In one sense to call anything neutral means neutral *in a specified respect or reference*; that is, with respect to the application of a particular set of alternatives. In this sense, I do not see that "neutral" means more than that a certain conception in either of its forms is inapplicable. To say, for example, that certain things are neutral with respect to the distinction of mental and material would be to say that there are things such that intelligent discussion of them is not forwarded by applying to them, without further specification, the distinctions marked out by the terms "mental-material." What is asserted is the irrelevancy of a certain type of distinction. Thus, before discussing whether a certain term, say "experience," has subjectivistic or objectivistic implications, we might have to consider whether, taken without specific qualifications, it was not rather a neutral term, a term to be used "without prejudice." Such neutral terms, understood to be aloof with reference to certain large antitheses which have had a great rôle in the history of thought, would certainly be a great aid in clearer discussion. For there is always a tendency to assume that the question is which one of two current antitheses is to be applied, when perhaps the primary question is whether either one is applicable.

In contrast with this conceivable meaning of the term neutral, which might be called the logical, stands another which might be called the metaphysical or ontological, namely, that there is a certain sort of stuff which is, intrinsically, neutral. Consequently, it is not necessary to specify any particular *respect or reference* in which it is taken as neutral. Rather the attempt is made to discover and describe a particular kind of material or stuff which may be called neutral exactly as a certain stuff may be called lead or wood.

It seems to me clear that nothing is gained (while there is danger that much in clarity and pertinency may be lost) in trying to bring social facts as such under the captions of "subjective" or "objective," or under those of "physical" or "mental." They are both or neither, according to the respect in which they are taken for dis-

cussion. To assert that they are "neutral" entities would then be a way of asserting one's conviction of the irrelevancy of introducing the question whether they are mental or material. The same might be said of mathematical terms. But while one might be glad to employ the term neutral if he thought that this was its connotation, one might hesitate to use it if he thought the term meant to convey something positive about the nature and structure of social things and mathematical things, something "metaphysical" over and above what the competent sociologist or mathematician would specifically discover.

Perhaps others share in my feelings that greater explicitness as to the sense in which writers use the term would conduce to clearness. It seems to me, for example, that I noted both senses in the recent discussions of the Philosophical Association. Historically speaking, the ambiguity may be detected, I think, in James's conception of pure experience, a conception having presumably certain affiliations with the contemporary conception of the neutral. At times Mr. James identifies a pure experience with experience of a peculiar subject-matter or stuff; it is of something which *antecedes* all reflection. It is a presence of a *that* which is not a *what*. Its description is highly reminiscent of some of the things said about sensation in his *Psychology*.<sup>1</sup> But the term pure experience is also given a radically different meaning. Contrast with the doctrine just laid down the following: "The instant field of the present is always experience in its 'pure' state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that*, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as some one's opinion about fact."<sup>2</sup> According to this passage, the experience in which a distinction is made between fact and opinion is itself, as a direct occurrence, "pure" of the distinction; it is "neutral" in reference to it. In this sense, pure experience is not characterized by possessing or presenting any peculiar subject-matter. The experience of any subject-matter, whether perceptual or conceptual, simple or complicated, elementary or systematized, just *as* an experience is pure or neutral. Only later on can it be referred to or classified, and so be treated as mental or physical. The following passage is, if possible, even more explicit in the same sense: "Let the reader arrest himself in the act of reading this article now. *Now* this is a pure experience. . . . Reading simply is, is there; and whether there for some one's con-

<sup>1</sup> Compare *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 93, and its assertion that only the new born babe has pure experience, with *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II., p. 7, and its assertion that "pure sensations can only be realized in the earliest days of life."

<sup>2</sup> *Radical Empiricism*, p. 74.

sciousness, or there for physical nature, is a question not yet put."<sup>3</sup> And he sums up by saying that the *point* of the pure experience theory is that any experience (not simply that of the new born babe) is in itself innocent of the "inner" or "outer" quality. The "inner-outer" distinction has to do with a classification made for a specific purpose and need. If we do not have the purpose, we do not classify; the distinction is irrelevant. In present language, in itself *any* experience is neutral. Consequently neutrality is not a matter of a peculiar stuff or distinctive element. This position seems to me as sound as appeal to the hypothetical experience of the new born babe is trivial or misleading. Such "purity" as the latter possesses is something to outgrow as rapidly as the baby in fact does outgrow it. It is not something to which to appeal as philosophically enlightening, much less as a philosophical norm or standard.

I venture to add that the contemporary conception of neutral entities as in themselves a particular kind of being seems to be derivable from a combination of this notion of James (which, as he pointed out, was influenced by Mach) with one obtained by an excursion of Münsterberg into the epistemology of psychology. In his article on "Psychological Atomism" he held that distinguishable sensations are molecules as it were of which the elementary atoms are not distinguishable, but which have to be assumed to satisfy certain scientific requirements.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Münsterberg assumed indeed that these "inexperientable" psychical atoms were radically different from physical atoms. But bring the pure and neutral sensation of the infant (taken from James) to bear upon these elements which determine the material and processes of our complex experience (according to Münsterberg) and you get something extraordinarily like the neutral entities out of which, according to Holt, physical and mental entities are both built up.

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## REVIEWS AND ABSTRACTS OF LITERATURE

*Le Système Taylor et la physiologie du travail professionnel.* J.-M. LAHY. Paris: Masson & Cie. 1916. Pp. vi + 196.

This volume was printed over two years since, its appearance being delayed by the war until the present, with the *reprise quasi-normale de la vie*. The Taylor system is considered not simply or chiefly as a means of increasing the factory output, but in its broader relations to the community. It is found weak on the psychophysio-

<sup>3</sup> *Radical Empiricism*, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> *Psychological Review*, Vol. VII., pp. 1-17.